



Region 8 - Libby Asbestos

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Site Background

In response to local concern and news articles about asbestos-contaminated vermiculite, the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency sent an Emergency Response Team to Libby, Montana in late November 1999. The Team immediately began collecting information.

EPA's first priority was to assess the current risk to public health from asbestos-contaminated vermiculite in Libby. Next, the Agency began taking necessary actions to reduce this risk.

In December 1999 EPA began collecting samples - nearly 700 - from air, soil, dust and insulation at homes and businesses. Indoor air sample results were released in January - first to property owners and then to the media and general public. EPA also moved immediately locate areas in and near Libby that were likely to have high levels of contamination such as two former vermiculite processing facilities.

EPA also looked at general exposure to Libby asbestos in the community and at health effects seen in people with little or no association with the vermiculite mine in Libby. EPA worked closely with local, state and federal agencies to understand how people might come into contact with asbestos-contaminated vermiculite and what can be done to prevent future exposures - in Libby and elsewhere.

Libby was added to EPA's [National Priorities List](#) in October 2002.

EPA established a program to inspect all properties in Libby. Approximately 3500 properties were inspected in 2002 and 2003. Over 12,000 soil samples were collected and analyzed and the results are being sent to property owners.

The former vermiculite processing plants and other public areas have been cleaned up. Cleanups have also been completed at a total of 390 residential and commercial properties. EPA expects to complete at least 170 cleanups in 2005.

Based on current information, EPA estimates that 1200-1400-residential and business properties will need some type of cleanup. The total number depends upon the final cleanup standards set by EPA. EPA intends to propose these standards later this year.

Additional sampling at a small number of properties in 2005 is intended to provide the final pieces of information needed for EPA to establish final cleanup levels and procedures.

EPA works closely with local, state and federal agencies, including:

- the City of Libby
- Lincoln County Commissioners and the Department of Environmental Health
- the Montana Department of Environmental Quality (DEQ)
- the Montana Department of Public Health and Human Services (DPHHS)
- and the federal Agency for Toxic Substances and Disease Registry (ATSDR)

Libby History

Vermiculite was discovered in Libby, Montana in 1881 by gold miners. In 1919 Edward Alley discovered its unique properties and, shortly after, the Zonolite Company formed and began mining vermiculite in the area. In 1963, W.R. Grace bought the Zonolite mining operations. The mine closed in 1990.

While in operation, the vermiculite mine in Libby may have produced 80 percent of the world's supply of vermiculite. Vermiculite has been used in building insulation and as a soil conditioner.

Unfortunately, the vermiculite from the Libby mine was contaminated with a toxic form of naturally-occurring asbestos called tremolite-actinolite asbestiform mineral fibers.

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